

Live and learn, or die and teach

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An AU in which Sai has a passion for teaching go rather than playing it, Shindou befriends terrifying Koreans, and Touya wonders how this became his life.

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Disclaimer: I don't own HnG. I also don't understand why FFN doesn't allow parentheses in my story's title. Oh well.

A/N: So I've briefly strayed from my HP epic into the Hikago fandom. Thanks to agedsolarwhisk for help and beta!

"I am Fujiwara no Sai and I have awoken from centuries of slumber to instruct you on the path of go," Sai says, appearing out of a goban in Hikaru's grandfather's shed.

"What the hell," says Hikaru, and faints.

It is the beginning of a beautiful friendship.

Sai pesters Hikaru to learn go, assured for reasons beyond Hikaru's comprehension that he must possess a talent for the game. Since this is the first time in Hikaru's life anyone believes he has a talent for anything but trouble, he's almost tempted to give in. In the end, he agrees to try just to get Sai to shut up (and maybe also to keep him from being so miserable).

Hikaru still doesn't get how anyone can get fired up about go until the Kaiou third board smirks at him from across the table.

"Admitting defeat is considered more honourable than dragging out a game you've already lost," the bastard informs him.

Hikaru contemplates hitting him with the goke.

"I've lost, then," he replies instead with perfectly bad grace as Sai shakes his head in the background.

Driven by the desire to annihilate Kaiou, Hikaru pays real attention to go for the first time. For a while, this makes Sai happy.

Hikaru plays with Sai every night, attends go club meetings and finally manages to beat Tsutsui.

Weirdly, this is where Sai becomes concerned.

"You need more," he declares and badgers Hikaru into entering a go salon.

Hikaru feels vaguely like he's landed on some new planet where everyone is old enough to be a museum artefact. He ends up coming again, though, because Sai, and also because it's not actually that bad, so whatever.

Hikaru's teachers at school have always said he lacks direction. Sai, it seems, has it in spades.

At the next interschool tournament, Hikaru beats Kaiou's second board. The boy stares at the stones, then at Hikaru and stomps away in a helpless fury that warms Hikaru to his petty teenage bones.

Hikaru is still grinning from ear to ear when a tall foreign-looking guy approaches him. Turns out, it's Kaiou's go coach. More to the point, guy's got a memory like a steel trap.

"You were the *third* board last year, were you not?" he asks, eyes roaming over Hikaru's game. "Your go club is quite small, is it not? Who is your instructor?"

"We, ah, don't have one, Yun-sensei," Hikaru says and fidgets as the teacher raises an eyebrow. "Not like Kaiou, hehe. But we work very hard!"

Yun-sensei looks at him and Hikaru gets the feeling he's reading way further into the game than Hikaru is.

"If things are as you say... and yet, this game... You need more," he says suddenly and becomes Sai's new favourite person.

Yun-sensei sends Hikaru to a go salon filled with terrifying Koreans, signs him up for several amateur tournaments and finally starts nagging at him to turn pro.

"You need better opponents," he explains. "You cannot grow further unless you enter the world of the pros. Think about your future, Shindou-kun."

"A-ha-ha," Hikaru says.

In so doing, he throws Sai into a crisis of confidence.

"Would you have chosen this road for yourself, Hikaru?" Sai frets. "Have I made the fatal mistake again, and taken over your life without meaning to?"

Hikaru kind of wishes he could say *I don't know what you're on about, I'd have picked up go anyway*. Who knows, maybe he would have, but-

But maybe not. And he can't lie to Sai.

"I'm happier this way," Hikaru says instead.

Again, a contestable point, but less so. Go is fun and Hikaru's made some unexpected friends that way. Hell, he's even managed to learn something of a foreign language, since he can communicate with the Koreans now. At the same time, it's not like his social life is flourishing outside of go. And he may or may not have put a solid block on thinking about girls in Sai's presence, which is, well, not the easiest thing ever, since he is kind of fourteen.

"That's what Torajirou said too," Sai reflects, fiddling with his fan.
"That he is happy."

"There you go, then."

"But Torarijou-Torajirou did not even have the chance to develop his own genius!"

At Hikaru's visible surprise-because Sai is many things, but he's sure a great teacher-Sai launches into a tale that is not quite as cheerful as Hikaru has always supposed it to be, even accounting for the whole premature death thing.

Unlike Hikaru, Torajirou could already play go when Sai materialized before him. Also unlike Hikaru, Torajirou recognized that Sai was a kickass player. Completely unlike Hikaru, Torajirou let his fear and awe of Sai rule him long enough that he insisted Sai play a lot of his games for him to show him how.

Torajirou-by that time, Honinbou Shusaku-died before Sai could fulfil his purpose of teaching his pupil the path to the divine move.

Sai evidently harbours a lot of guilt over this, though how he can help being awesome at go, Hikaru doesn't know.

"But- *do* you want to play?" he thinks to ask, suddenly stuck by guilt of his own.

All this time, Sai has never voiced the desire to do anything but teach Hikaru, but what if he has been missing the game?

Sai gives him a gentle smile.

"It is not as important to me as watching you grow, Hikaru."

But the bee has taken fixed residence in Hikaru's bonnet, and he won't let the matter drop.

At first, Sai balks at the idea of playing invisible opponents in a plastic box. He adapts, with Hikaru's guidance.

Hikaru soon sees that Sai's right: playing diverts him, but trouncing easy opponents doesn't seem to excite him very much. He is interested in exploring the modern style of play; he even incorporates it in his own game, as time passes. Still, though Sai has a regular opportunity to play, his main priority remains Hikaru.

... Who can, actually, kind of emphasize with Torajirou at this stage. Hikaru's good enough of a player to see that Sai's *amazing* ; what's he doing wasting his time with Hikaru?

"Illuminating your path to the divine move," Sai repeats patiently.

"What about your own path, have you thought of that?" Hikaru challenges.

"I have, once," Sai says, his gaze strangely drifting towards the TV set.

"Well, then?"

Sai cocks his head to the side.

"Maybe one day I will ask you to let me play someone, Hikaru," he says enigmatically. He says a lot of things enigmatically. It's just how one talks, Hikaru supposes, after a thousand years of not-quite-afterlife. "One day I might again reach out for the hand of god. But not yet."

That summer, Hikaru is happily playing Hon Suyon in the Salon of Terrifying Koreans when two Japanese kids walk in.

This creates a stir, because the last Japanese kid to walk in here was Hikaru, and everybody knows how that went.

"Hey, blondie," the proprietor calls, "these your friends?"

Hikaru puts down a stone, leaving it as enticing bait for Hon, and turns around. He's never seen either of these kids before, but one of them does look to be about his age. He's got violent red hair and an attitude. The other seems to be the polite uptight kind he sees a lot around Kaiou.

Hikaru shakes his head, disclaiming his knowledge of the duo. The proprietor's face stretches in a big smile.

"Come in, Japanese children," he says. "You can play some go with us."

"Oh my god, your uncle is a pervert," Hikaru tells Hon, facing him again.

Pervert is one of the first words he's learnt in Korean.

Hon gives no sign of alarm at this revelation, but instead slaps down a stone that totally destroys Hikaru's trap in the left upper corner.

"We were told to come to this salon because there are strong players here," one of the newcomers says.

"Of course. We'll go easy on you," the salon owner promises.

Hikaru rolls his eyes.

"We don't need that!" another voice protests. "We're insei, you know!"

With half an ear, Hikaru can discern a discussion about Hon aiming for a pro career in Korea, but the game's getting dangerous, so he concentrates fully on his next few hands and misses the rest of the conversation.

When he looks up, the two blokes are standing next to their board and frowning.

"Are you a kenkyuusei too?" the redhead asks, pointing a finger at Hikaru.

"On the scale of one to ten, how Korean do I look?" Hikaru inquires in return.

"That hardly matters," Hon says in stuffy Korean, just as the redhead snaps:

"What? You're playing here with them, I was only asking." He peers suspiciously at Hon Suyon. "Will you play me?"

Meanwhile, the other guy stares at Hikaru.

"You're not an insei," he says.

"No," Hikaru agrees.

"You're not a pro, either," he ventures.

"Correct on both counts!" Hikaru congratulates him.

"But you-him-" he gestures at Hon Suyon, then at the board.

"Yeah," Hikaru says. "It's fun. Wanna play?"

As it happens, Isumi-for that is his name-plays a mean game. So does Waya, the other insei, although Hon has clearly had the upper hand from the start.

The two of them say they are preparing for the pro exams. They are very determined to pass and Hikaru almost envies them that certainty of what they want to do with their future.

"We'll come again," they say.

So they do.

Hikaru learns some other inseis' names and gets the hang of navigating the Go Institute. The former takes him a couple of study sessions at Waya's flat; the latter consumes the better part of two months, because the place is a maze. The people there aren't always as frightening as the Koreans, but some are creepy beyond all imagining.

(These include an ancient geezer who stops next to Hikaru and stares at *Sai* for several minutes while Hikaru tries not to breathe.

"How interesting," the old dude pronounces and refocuses on Hikaru. "One of the new ones, are you? Planning to come after my title, boy?"

"Eh, not yet?" Hikaru ventures.

Isumi's appalled stare and Waya's facepalming tell him he's committed some grave faux pas-again-but the geezer is pleased. He erupts in the most inappropriate laughter Hikaru has ever heard and says he looks forward to when Hikaru makes up his mind.

"That was Kuwabara Honinbou," Waya hisses, as the geezer walks away.

"Okay. So, ramen?")

Waya and Isumi also invite Hikaru to their shin shodan games, which apparently stand for getting creamed by older pros in turn.

Finally, Waya drags Hikaru to a study session with his go teacher.

"Waya has told me about you," Morishita-sensei says, squinting at Hikaru in a vaguely threatening fashion. "I want to see your game. Shirakawa-kun! Play him."

Hikaru takes this in stride, because he has long ago accepted that all go players are crazy. Morishita-sensei watches the match with a frown and finally concludes:

"Well, at least you don't fall apart before strong opponents."

"Koreans," Waya moans somewhere off to the side.

"Maybe you need more Koreans in your life, Waya!" Morishita-sensei barks. "How are you to beat Touya if you fold against Kawasaki 3-dan?"

Judging by his after-class bitching, Waya fields questions of this kind quite a lot.

Hikaru's been playing go for two and a half years by the time he meets Touya Akira. It's been a fun two and a half years, which just shows he hasn't really been playing go.

Turns out, go is not fun.

It's out and out warfare, a duel to the death; it's hanging by the skin of your teeth and throwing all you have, and all that you hadn't know you had, onto the battlefield. It's maybe dying, or maybe prevailing, but somehow, through it all, rising a step higher, closer to the stars, to shape a universe of your own making.

Hikaru's hands are shaking at the end of his game with Touya Akira. He's not sure he'll ever start breathing properly.

On the other side of the goban, his opponent is clenching his fists, his eyes still full of murder.

"You," Touya Akira grinds out. "What is your name?"

"My name is Shindou Hikaru."

Touya takes a deep breath.

"Shindou Hikaru. Where have you been, and why have I not heard of you before?"

Hikaru blinks, unsure what to say. It doesn't happen to him often, but neither do such games. *Never* do such games. Never-

"You are far beyond me," Hikaru says, touching the stones in wonder. "But-"

"Why have I not heard of your go?" Touya Akira demands. "Why have I not had-"

Hikaru swallows, his throat suddenly dry.

"Because I have not played this game before," he says, as this truth dawns on him.

On the heels of this realization, sensory awareness returns. Hikaru suddenly sees they're surrounded by people-insei, and maybe some young pros, and some older ones, too. And it sinks in that he's just played Touya 5-dan before a whole crowd of people from the Go Institute. He's just *lost* to Touya 5-dan, but he's also just-it may have started as Waya's attempt to needle him, but-he's just learnt something so precious he can't share it with anyone.

Anyone, maybe, but-

"Sai?"

Hikaru stands up, heedless of the conversation around him.

"Sai?"

He's there, but he's so still he frightens Hikaru for a moment, and something bright and unfamiliar is shining in his eyes as he looks at the board.

"I am proud to have been your teacher, Hikaru," Sai says that night, when they are in Hikaru's room.

"What do you mean, have been?" Hikaru asks, instincts on high alert. "You still are, Sai!"

Sai's smile is gentle, but he is clutching his fan with a nervousness that is new.

"Yes, I am," he agrees. "But... I'm not sure you need me anymore to grow, Hikaru."

"Of course I need you!" Hikaru says, jumping to his feet. "What are you thinking?!"

Go without Sai is like breathing without air, it's like-

"I need you to promise me something, Hikaru," Sai says, then, serious. "Do not stop playing go. Carry it onwards and remember me when you play."

"Sai!" Hikaru asks, not a little shrilly. "What are you talking about? You are right here!"

But Sai is suddenly convinced that he is going to disappear. Nothing Hikaru can say or do will shake him in this belief. Sai knows, too, that Hikaru cannot deny it: he has now seen a glimpse of the divine move that Sai meant him to see.

"That doesn't mean anything," Hikaru says. "I haven't reached any divine-anything-I can't, without you, Sai."

But Sai has already made up his mind. He feels the winds of eternity, he says, blowing at his feet. If he can ask Hikaru to fulfil his last selfish request before he goes-

Hikaru contemplates refusing the request just to make Sai hang around for longer, but of course it doesn't work like that.

"I want to play this man," Sai says, pointing at the TV screen.

"But of course ." Hikaru sighs.

Sai gazes at Hikaru soulfully. Hikaru throws up his hands in surrender.

"Oh, fine. *Fine.*"

Hikaru's always been a direct kind of guy. Perhaps lurking at the Go Institute to corner Touya Akira is a creepy kind of strategy, but whatever. It works.

Touya Akira stares at him, eyebrows raised.

"Your internet friend wants to play my father," he says. He is visibly unimpressed.

"My uber-amazing-go-player internet friend," Hikaru clarifies.

"Wants to play my father," Touya repeats. "In a serious game."

"Very serious," Hikaru agrees. "I mean, yes."

Touya sighs, but Hikaru does not miss a calculating gleam that enters his eyes.

"Perhaps that could be arranged," the Meijin's son says. "On one condition."

Hikaru looks at him evenly.

"You will come after me and join the world of the pros!" Touya Akira proclaims.

The future suddenly stretches in front of Hikaru with perfect clarity. He can refuse to become a pro and be forever stalked by Touya Akira. Or he can become a pro and be forever stalked by Touya Akira.

Only one of the scenarios includes getting paid for the trouble.

With that in mind-

"Don't lie to yourself, Hikaru," says Sai, who has been quietly watching the entire exchange. "You *know* what you want to do."

Hikaru looks at Sai. Yes, god help him, he does know.

He wants to play Touya Akira again and see if their second game will be anything like the first. He wants to get a lot stronger and beat Touya Akira, or at least play as his true equal, and stand at that same height staring across at the stars they'd put in the sky. He wants all of that and more.

"Do you accept my terms, Shindou Hikaru?" Touya challenges, as if it's not a foregone conclusion.

"Yes, I do," Hikaru says calmly, and that's just that.

Later, Hikaru will learn that Touya Meijin has come to regard the game with Sai as the best of his career.

Later, Hikaru will launch a career of his own, wishing desperately that Sai were there to guide him through the gruelling pro exams and to see him emerge on the other side.

Later, Hikaru will argue in his shaky Korean that Honinbou Shuusaku could wipe the floor with Ko Yongha any day, in equal measure embarrassing and impressing his Hokuto Cup teammates.

But for now, Hikaru can only stand in front of an open window, staring unseeingly into the clear air.

"Thank you," he says to Touya on the phone, "for allowing him to play that game."

"It was a magnificent game." Touya's voice is hesitant. "I wish I hadn't been so-will he play my father again?"

Hikaru clutches the receiver so tight it hurts.

"No. He's... gone."

"I'm sorry," Touya says. He can't know what Sai meant to Hikaru, but he sounds sincere all the same. Perhaps, if nothing else, he can appreciate that the world has lost an amazing go player.

Hikaru closes his eyes.

"Yeah. Me too."

The silence stretches for a while. Touya sighs.

"I'll see you again after your pro exams, Shindou. I wish you the best of luck."

"Yeah. Thanks. I'll see you."

Hikaru puts down the phone, exhales.

Life will go on.

All he needs to do now is-get up, walk on, make Sai proud.

Hikaru braces himself and takes the first step.